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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically explores the matches and mismatches between the needs of different audience about educational quality and the ability of accreditation as it is currently constituted to respond to these needs. Many different audiences now seek assurance of the quality of colleges and universities using accreditation as the mechanism. External constituents looking to accreditation for assurance of institutional quality include federal and state governments, employers, professions, and students and parents. These various constituents vary in their expectations of quality based on the unit of analysis and the focus of quality determination. A look at these varying perspectives suggests that accreditation, as currently constituted, serves the needs of external constituents when these constituents are interested in institutional or programmatic capacity and behavior, but it does not serve as well when the focus is on the use of that capacity to achieve particular outcomes valued by the constituents in question. While accreditation as currently structured and conducted can serve the basic quality assurance needs of the academy, the federal government, and state governments in their roles as owner-operators of institutions, neither institutional nor programmatic accreditation can serve the quality assurance needs of constituents whose view of quality focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis: students, employers, and state governments in their roles as purchasers of services from higher education. (SLD)

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Prepared by Dennis P. Jones

National Center for Higher
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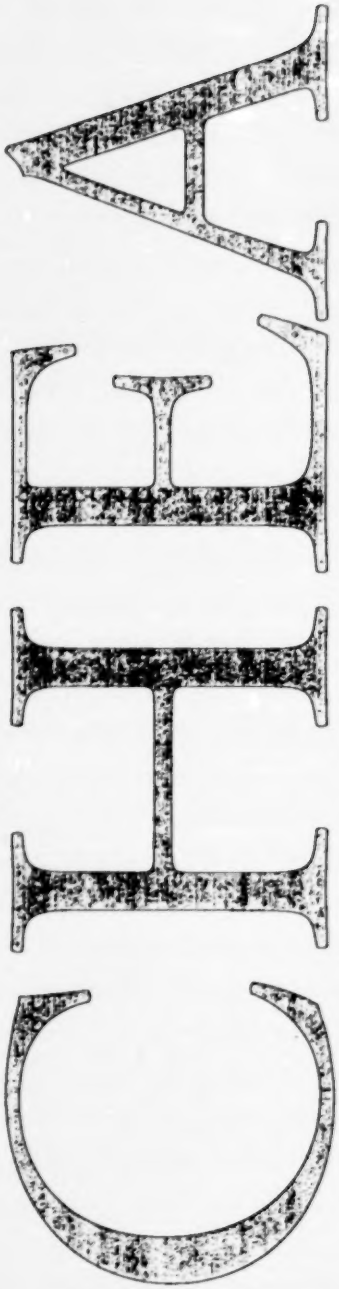

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Prepared by

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National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

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CHEA
Council for Higher Education Accreditation

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 national, regional, and specialized accreditors.

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Different Perspectives on Information about Educational Quality: Implications for the Role of Accreditation

I. Introduction

Accreditation has become widely accepted as the primary vehicle for assuring the quality of higher education in the United States. Indeed, expectations of quality assurance now far exceed the purposes for which accreditation processes were originally designed. In the absence of alternative mechanisms, accreditation is being asked to serve more and more masters. In some cases such accommodation has been straightforward. In other cases, however, the fit is not good—accreditation does not naturally provide the kinds of information that certain audiences see as addressing quality. It is the purpose of this paper to systematically investigate the matches and mismatches between the needs of different audiences for information about educational quality and the ability of accreditation as it is currently constituted to respond to these needs.

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The original audience for accreditation was the academy itself. The process did not arise in response to concerns about quality expressed by external audiences. As an internal quality assurance process, accreditation served the purpose of identifying/certifying colleges and universities as being legitimate institutions of higher education—qualifying them (and their degrees and academic credits) to be accepted as full-fledged members of a kind of club. This had the practical advantage of easing the processes through which institutions made decisions about accepting one another's "products." A secondary purpose became formative evaluation. By establishing standards for admission into a selective (and desirable) "club," institutions were provided with meaningful targets to strive toward. For many this constituted a stimulus for improvement.

Since the primary audience for accreditation initially was the academy itself, quality was defined against academic standards. Quality was measured against benchmarks consisting of:

1. **The characteristics of a "good" institution.** These properties were almost exclusively conceived in terms of the quantity and quality of institutional assets—faculty, facilities, library/information resources, etc.
2. **Good institutional practices.** These consisted of a relatively straightforward list of things that "good" institutions were supposed to do. For example, the benchmarks served to ensure that processes were in place to deal with key issues (approve courses, deal with student complaints, ensure faculty freedoms, etc.) and to ensure that students were treated fairly and appropriately.

To assure that institutions met—and continued to adhere to—established standards, a two-step process was established. Step one was an in-depth self-study, in which the institution sought to document that it did, in fact, meet stated standards. Step two was a site visit by a panel of peers, individuals who could test the assertions and conclusions presented in the self-study, come to an independent judgment about the worthiness of the institution to achieve accredited status, and suggest ways in which it might improve its functioning. As long as the audience was the academy itself (and the academy was at that time comprised of relatively homogenous institutions), this approach worked well. It served the purposes of both summative and formative evaluation and used criteria that were very much in the academic mainstream. To its own satisfaction, the academy had developed an entirely work-

able approach to assuring minimum standards of institutional quality. More important, it was the only game in town; there were no other arbiters of institutional quality. Accreditation thus became higher education's "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

Once established as the arbiter of quality for colleges and universities in the United States—albeit in a very specific, relatively narrow context—accreditation quite logically was looked to as a way to assure quality for other audiences in other contexts. These new expectations of the accrediting process had two important characteristics. First, the audience shifted from internal to external constituents. And second, the focus of attention tipped markedly toward making summative judgments about quality.

"Once established as the arbiter of quality for colleges and universities in the United States...accreditation quite logically was looked to as a way to assure quality for other audiences in other contexts."

Among the external audiences looking to accreditation for assurance of institutional quality are:

1. **The federal government.** Through provisions of Title IV of the Higher Education Act, the federal government requires that an institution be accredited by a regional or national organization as a condition to receive federal funds. Student financial aid represents a major component of federal funding to higher education. As a consequence, the federal government is particularly interested in ensuring that factors regarding fair treatment of students are included in the "good practice" standards—factors that include truth in advertising, refund policies, procedures for ensuring that complaints are heard and appropriately dealt with, and assurance that the institution will remain a going concern. These interests and many others have thus found their way into the criteria by which institutional quality is judged. The use of accreditation as a gatekeeper for access to federal funds changed not only some of the criteria by which quality was judged but added additional (types of) institutions to those seeking accreditation as well. Many did not fit the profile of institutions for which the standards were originally established—especially in the case of vocational and proprietary institutions. These changes have been accommodated by the accreditation community, but not without considerable struggle.

2. **State governments.** States have historically licensed institutions doing business within their borders. For many, regional or national accreditation was *prima facie* evidence of institutional legitimacy. In many ways their issues and concerns closely parallel those of the federal government.

3. **Employers.** The concern of employers that their new employees have a "high quality" education has encouraged the emergence of specialized accrediting organizations. This is especially true in those disciplines in which certification is required to practice in the related occupations (health-related occupations, teacher education, law, etc.). Beyond these fields, employers typically require that their new hires be graduates of accredited institutions. They have typically been influential in developing the standards for specialized accrediting organizations, but much less engaged with institutional accreditors.

4. **Professions.** This audience has interests very similar to those held by employers—to ensure that entrants into a profession have had the education and training needed to prepare them for effective practice. This is not to say that employers and representatives of professions always see eye to eye. The professions have an interest in setting the bar high for entrance to a profession and keeping wages generous. Employers may have quite the opposite incentive.

5. **Students and their parents.** This audience has much in common with both employers and the federal government. Like the former, they seek assurance that the institution's graduates are well prepared; and like the latter, they are concerned about how students are treated. But beyond the simple fact of accreditation, their interests have not found a cohesive independent voice vis-à-vis accreditation of higher education institutions.

The second distinguishing characteristic of the new expectations of the accrediting process is concern with summative evaluation almost to the exclusion of any attention to formative evaluation. External constituents want institutions to be graded, while institutions want to be "helped." Tensions between the formative and summative purposes of accreditation have of course always existed in the higher education community. But they have been exacerbated considerably by the addition of these new constituents with different agendas and views of quality.

New and different interests and expectations have thus been piled atop a set of standards and a process designed for quite a different purpose. Although standards have been adjusted to try to accommodate, there remain serious questions about the efficacy of accreditation as a mechanism to serve these many masters. Can it really address all these divergent needs? Which constituents can it serve best? Which least well? And for those constituents whose definitions of quality are least well aligned with the definitions applied by the academy, what are the alternatives?

This paper tries to address these questions by:

1. Interpreting what the key external constituents mean by "quality."
2. Identifying the kinds of information and forms of presentation necessary to demonstrate quality to each of these audiences.
3. Raising the bottom-line question of whether or not current accreditation organizations and processes are equipped to assure quality to these various audiences **in the terms that they define it** and, if they are not, what potential alternatives might be available.

External constituents looking to accreditation for assurance of institutional quality are:

- The federal government
- State governments
- Employers
- Professions
- Students and parents

II. Different Perspectives on Quality

Many different audiences now seek assurance of the quality of colleges and universities using the mechanism of accreditation, although this mechanism was originally designed to serve the needs of only one of those audiences, the academy This is important because the perspectives on quality held by these audiences vary: all do not subscribe to a common definition of "quality." This section explores these differences in perspectives in terms of two elements:

1. **Unit of analysis.** Is the constituent interested in the quality of the institution? The program or discipline? or the individual student or graduate?
2. **Focus of quality determination.** Is the constituent primarily interested in inputs, processes/good practices, or outcomes?

Both of these elements are described across the range of constituents concerned with quality assurance in higher education indicated above: the academy, the federal government, state government, employers, professions, and students and parents.

A. The Academy—Leadership of Institutions

1. Unit of Analysis—the Institution as a Whole

While board members and the executive leadership of colleges and universities have some interest in the quality of individual programs, their primary interest is necessarily focused on the institution in its entirety, not on its constituent parts.

2. Focus of Quality Determination

Institutional leaders were the original audience for accreditation information. As a consequence, their preferences and needs are reflected in the standards that have historically been central to accreditation decisions. These standards have given

primacy to:

a. The adequacy and appropriateness, in the light of mission, of the assets available to the institution. Assets included in this consideration are:

- Board of Trustees—Governance Structure
- Faculty
- Other personnel
- Finances
- Programs/curricula
- Students
- Facilities
- Equipment/technology
- Information/library resources

b. Sound institutional processes. While there are many ways that interest in this arena might be categorized, most institutional leaders want to see policies and procedures that ensure:

- Ethical treatment of students in such matters as truth in advertising, refunds after withdrawal from a course or the institution, adjudication of grievances, maintenance of privacy, etc.
- Ethical treatment of employees—policies in such areas as performance reviews, dues process with regard to termination, workload and remuneration.
- Rigorous consideration of key academic decisions at the institution—for example, decisions regarding such things as course and program approval, graduation requirements, and promotion and tenure.
- An appropriate balance of centralization and decentralization in decision-making responsibility and authority. This applies to both administrative/faculty authority (the institution's policies on shared governance) as well as policies that specify the authority of executive leadership vis-à-vis that of the board.

- What do key external constituents of higher education mean by "quality?"
- What are the kinds of information and forms of presentation necessary to demonstrate quality to each of these constituents?
- Are accrediting organizations currently equipped to assure quality to these various constituents—as these constituents define quality?
- Are there potential alternatives available in accreditors who are not so equipped?

B. The Academy—Leadership of Academic Programs

1. Unit of Analysis

While to some extent concerned about overall institutional quality, the leadership of particular academic programs is chiefly concerned about their individual standings—especially in comparison to peers. Institutions enter the calculation chiefly in terms of their ability to provide adequate resources. And as emphasized by some specialized accreditation organizations, higher "quality" programs have distinct administrative authority that limits the control the institution can exercise over them.

2. Focus of Quality Determination

In the main, the factors considered by program directors in demonstrating/assessing quality are similar to those used by their institutional counterparts. But some important variations are noted below:

a. Adequacy and appropriateness of assets available to the program

- Board/Governance Structure. Programs do not have separate governance structures, although many have advisory boards. As a consequence, the quality question revolves around the capacity and effectiveness of these boards in bringing the employer perspective to bear on judgments of quality. In particular, these may influence the processes of defining learning outcomes for the program and assessing the achievement of those objectives.
- Programs/Curricula. Much more attention is focused on curriculum structure and content by program managers than by institutional leaders.

b. Good practices

No significant differences except that policies regarding decision authority revolve around the institution vis-à-vis the program leadership rather than institution vis-à-vis the board.

c. Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes tend not to be of particular interest to institutional lead executives unless they 1) are good enough to provide grist for the university advancement mill, or 2) are bad enough to create an embarrassment to the institution. At the program level, however, academic leaders become very interested in learning outcomes as the basis for quality assurance and program assessment. This is especially true for programs producing graduates who must be licensed/certified before they can practice in the profession. Outcomes that get particular attention are "behavioral" outcomes—those dealing with:

- Passing licensure exams.
- Placement in positions related to the field of preparation.
- Furtherance of education and training (transferability to a four-year institution or attendance at graduate school).

C. The Federal Government

1. Unit of Analysis

The overwhelming focus of concern for the federal government is the institution, which acts as an agent of federal authorities in administering student financial aid. The only (and occasional) exception is when federal funds are used to support particular, targeted program areas—for example, Carl Perkins funding for vocational education or, more recently, teacher education.

2. Focus of Quality Determination

Federal interest is comprehensive regarding institutions, embracing basic capacity, processes and good practices, and outcomes. Recently, the focus on outcomes has become far more insistent.

a. The federal government's primary question about **capacity** is whether or not the organization is a legitimate institution of postsecondary education. The evidence it accepts in this regard is accreditation by a federally recognized regional or national accrediting organization. By adopting accredited status as its assurance of minimally acceptable institutional quality at least regarding capacity, the federal government *de facto* adopts the same definition of quality as that utilized by the academy itself.

Financial capacity is of particular concern to the federal government that seeks assurance that the institution is—and can continue to be—a "going concern."

The various constituents of higher education—the academy itself, the federal government, state government, employers, professions and students and parents—vary in their expectations of quality based on two elements:

- Unit of Analysis: What is the object of assuring quality? Is it the institution, a program within the institution, or the student?
- Focus of Quality Determination: What types of information are needed to provide reliable information about quality? Is it information about institutional or programmatic resources, processes, or structure? Is it information about learning outcomes?

This assurance is sought on behalf of both students—ensuring that the institution will remain in business long enough for them to complete their studies—and the federal government itself—ensuring that the institution can be an effective steward of the federal resources entrusted to it.

b. The federal government is particularly interested in **good practices** as they pertain to:

- Fair and ethical treatment of students. Much like the academy itself, the federal government is concerned with truth in advertising, the absence of fraud and abuse in the treatment of students, the presence of procedures for dealing with grievances, adherence to required refund policies, and accurate record-keeping. Indeed, the institutional leadership's concern with these practices stems largely from federal insistence on attention to these issues.
- Adherence to federal rules and regulations. In addition to those good practices held in common with the academy, the federal government defines quality in terms of the institution's ability to comply with a plethora of federal rules and regulations. These include regulations dealing with such varied topics as distribution of student financial aid and collection of student loans, ethical treatment of human subjects, workplace safety, and handling of toxic materials.

c. In the realm of **outcomes**, the focus of quality assurance is on:

- Student learning outcomes. This interest is made manifest in the regulations pertaining to federal recognition of accrediting organizations, which require these bodies to include institutional attention to learning outcomes in their standards.
- Student success in terms of retention and graduation rates. The federal government invests heavily in enhancing access to postsecondary education through funding of student financial aid programs. But its interest extends beyond access to a concern that the students who enter higher education successfully complete their educations.
- Contributions to national priorities through research. Along an entirely different dimension, the federal government has a concern that (a selected set of) institutions make contributions to national priorities through research and graduate education. Success in the competitive peer review process is the usual measure of quality in this domain (a measure, incidentally, that primarily relates to institutional capacity).

D. State Governments

States have a unique, two-pronged perspective with regard to concerns about quality assurance in higher education. On the one hand they are the "owner-operators" of public institutions of higher education. From this perspective, they are concerned about the quality of institutions themselves (primarily defined in terms of the quality of the assets), a perspective that aligns their interests with those of the academy. But like any "owner-operator," they add to these concerns about quality of assets additional concerns regarding efficient operations that are not always shared by their institutional counterparts. On the other hand, state governments are purchasers of services from a range of institutions (both public and private), a perspective that aligns their interests with those of students and employers. This breadth of interests means that states are interested in capacity, good practices, and outcomes of both institutions and

(some) programs. This array of interests is reflected below.

With respect to the **institution** as unit of analysis, the state's focus of quality determination is as follows:

1. *Capacity*

   As does the federal government, state governments use regional or national accreditation as the evidence that a given institution meets the threshold level of quality. By so doing, they adopt the perspective of the academy as to the definition of quality.

2. *Good Practices*

   Good practices that are of concern to the academy and federal government—those dealing with fair and ethical treatment of students, faculty, etc.—are also of interest to states. In addition, states seek assurance of quality as it is revealed in:

   - Management's ability to operate institutions in compliance with the rules and regulations promulgated by the state, as well as the federal government.
   - The institution's ability to respond to priority needs of the state and its citizens, both individual and corporate.
   - Management's ability to run institutions efficiently.

3. *Institutional Outcomes*

   While states judge institutions primarily on the bases of capacity/assets and behaviors, concerns with outcomes are also creeping into the quality assurance picture. The evidence sought to demonstrate quality in this respect is usually related to:

   - Retention and graduation rates.
   - Quality of student learning. State governments have been concerned about the quality of K-12 learning outcomes for two decades. With the emergence of standards-based education and universal testing programs designed to assess student performance against these standards, many states feel that they have accomplished their main objectives in K-12 quality. Now they are turning their attention to postsecondary education. Many are content to rely on accrediting organizations to devise approaches that allow these bodies to be the guarantors of student learning. Others have put policies into place that require institutions to devise their own assessment systems and report publicly on what they find. Should either approach be found wanting, it is likely that states will take more direct action to acquire needed evidence of student learning. Indeed, for one reason or another, six states (South Dakota, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, and Georgia) already operate some kind of common testing program for public higher education.

With respect to the individual **academic program**, state government's interest in quality is typically confined to the particular set of programs that has direct bearing on state priorities—for example, economic development, workforce preparation, or the improvement of K-12 education. While basic capacity is of interest, the state's primary interest is as a purchaser of service. As a consequence, the locus of concern is predominantly in the areas of good practices and outcomes.

1. *Capacity*

   At the program level, the capacity that matters to states is national reputation. A strong national reputation—especially in research—allows the program to build

more capacity, to spin off successes, or to further enhance competitiveness in other ways. In short, capacity has to be such that the program reaches "signature" status not only within the institution, but nationally. The various devices by which departments/programs are ranked—in terms of research success, peer ratings, etc. by credible third-party organizations—provide a measure of quality that is appropriate in this context.

2. *Good Practices*

The good practices that matter most to states are those that reflect the program's demonstrated ability to be responsive to needs of the state:

- Quickly,
- Efficiently, and
- In ways that are problem-centered (i.e., they seek solutions to client-defined problems rather than redefining problems in an attempt to utilize available "academic" solutions).

High quality in this domain is seen by states as much in terms of flexibility and nimbleness as in any other way.

3. *Outcomes*

Finally, with respect to outcomes, high quality programs are seen by states as those which:

- Produce significant number of degrees in high-demand fields and in fields closely linked to state-level economic development initiatives and other similar priorities.
- Are successful in preparing students for certification or licensure. This is usually indicated by a high proportion of graduates who pass licensure exams on the first attempt.
- Place graduates in employment positions that are economically and professionally rewarding (especially in-state).

E. Employers

Employers have an interest in three units of analysis—the institution, programs, and individual students and graduates—although their levels of interest vary considerably across these three. In general, their least interest is in quality at the institutional level, and their greatest concern is in the quality of individual graduates as potential employees. All three aspects are addressed below.

With respect to **institutions**, employers focus almost solely on institutional reputation, an intangible but very important asset. They want to be able to say that "we hire our new employees from the very best institutions." In addition, they want assurance that the institution is a credible source of new employees with solid cognitive abilities and—perhaps just as important—the right combination of attitudes and values. Comparative rankings, particularly those presented in the popular press, are therefore preferred types of information.

With respect to individual **academic programs**, employers are interested in all three major domains—assets, good practices, and outcomes produced.

1. *Capacity*

Employers are concerned about several major dimensions of programmatic capa-

city including:

- Its overall reputation. For example, is the program a "top 30" program as ranked in the popular or trade presses? Here again, the concern is that the program be viewed by corporate peers as being a credible source of new employees.
- The nature of its faculty. Here the question is not the "quality" of faculty benchmarked against academic standards, but rather the faculty's "fitness for purpose." For example, they are interested in whether or not the faculty have the capacity to apply knowledge to the kinds of applied research problems of highest priority to the company. Credible evidence often takes the form of demonstrated success (and therefore an acquired reputation) for problem-solving in these areas.
- The nature of its curriculum. Here again the primary issue for employers is fitness for purpose, indicated primarily by whether or not the curriculum contains elements directly related to the needs of the company. This is often best demonstrated through an analysis of the syllabi of required and elective courses.

2. *Good Practices*

Employer interest in good practices is focused on the extent to which faculty and staff within the program are directly responsive to the needs of employers. Questions of interest here include:

- Do they provide continuing education to employees in areas of high priority to employers?
- Do they provide problem-solving assistance through consulting and applied research activities?
- Is there an active "public service" component to the program's activities?

A second interest is the extent to which programs require hands-on experience for students through such elements as internships or co-ops.

3. *Outcomes*

Outcomes of interest to employers for individual academic programs include:

- Numbers of graduates.
- Placement information, such as the percentage of graduates placed, the industries and occupations in which graduates are placed, and the average salaries that they can command.
- Pass rates on licensure exams (where appropriate).
- Any information that allows direct comparisons of the program's performance with other similar programs.

Finally, with respect to **individual graduates**, employer concern of this unit of analysis is focused almost exclusively on outcomes. Most prominently, these include:

- Knowledge, skills, and attitudes of graduates.
- Certification of learning, especially against industry-specified standards.
- Demonstrated ability to apply knowledge in workplace settings.

F. Professions

Professions have interests very similar to those of employers, with the primary emphasis being on the **individual** unit of analysis—ensuring that individuals have the knowledge and skills necessary to be fully functioning members of the profession.

With respect to **institutions**, members of professions are concerned that the institutions from which individuals who enter the profession graduate are regionally or nationally accredited. With respect to individual **academic programs**, the professions are closely aligned with the interests of specialized accrediting organizations. They are concerned about all these major domains-basic capacity, good practices, and outcomes.

1. Programmatic Capacity

The primary issues regarding programmatic capacity revolve around:

- The quality of faculty. While members of the professions share with employers an interest in faculty quality, their definition of "quality" is somewhat different. Employers are particularly interested that faculty can prepare those students to function effectively in the professional workplace—the "fitness for purpose" criterion. Members of professions tend to favor faculty capacity that can stake out new ground for the profession—i.e., a faculty benchmarked against more traditional academic measures.
- The content of the curriculum. The primary issue for members/leaders of the profession is whether or not the curriculum contains those elements necessary for a graduate to enter the profession as a fully qualified practitioner. The perspective of employers as they judge curricula against their criteria of fitness for employment purposes may be significantly at odds with the "profession's" judgment about preparation for professional life. While these judgments may sometimes be at odds, an analysis of the syllabi of required and elective courses is the basic evidence that both parties will use to inform their judgments.

2. Good Practices

Leaders of the profession are interested in the extent to which faculty and staff of the program are directly engaged in activities which further the status and practice of the profession. They are thus particularly interested in:

- Research that enhances the knowledge base and approaches to practice within the profession.
- Public service that takes the form of service to the profession in its institutionalized form (e.g., contributions to annual association meetings, continuing education activities, etc.)

3. Outcomes

Outcomes of individual academic programs that are of particular interest to members of the professions are very similar to those of import to employers. These include:

- Numbers of graduates.
- Placement information—the industries and occupations in which placed and their average salaries.
- Pass rates on licensure exams (where appropriate).

Finally, with regard to **individual graduates**, the profession focuses exclusively on

outcomes. Most important, they are concerned about whether or not graduates have acquired the knowledge and skills that allow them to be licensed or certified to practice the profession.

G. Students and Parents

Students and parents are interested in specific aspects of institutional programs, as well as with a particular range of outcomes. With respect to **institutions** and **individual academic programs**, they judge quality in terms of the following:

1. Access to Assets

Students are typically less concerned with the quality of institutional and programmatic assets defined in terms of academic standards than they are with their own personal access to those assets. As a result, the kinds of questions in which they are most interested include:

- Can they enroll in the courses they need to fulfill general education requirements and complete their majors, or are courses "closed out," not offered, or otherwise unavailable when it is their turn to register?
- Can they enroll in programs in which they choose to major?
- Do they have ready and ongoing access to faculty members as advisers and mentors?
- Do they have access to technology at convenient times?
- Does the institution provide the particular support services that they need—for instance, advising, counseling, tutoring, child care—both in general and at convenient times and schedules?

2. Good Practices

From the student and parent perspective, institutional and programmatic good practices translate into the institution's ability to provide an environment in which the student:

- Is safe,
- Feels a sense of belonging,
- Is treated fairly, and
- Feels like a valued client.

In short, parents and students are concerned about whether the institution is client-centered and reflects this stance in all of its interactions with students.

3. Outcomes

Students are less concerned about general outcomes than they are about the record of success of **students like themselves**, students of similar demographic characteristics and academic interests who come to college with the same level of academic preparation and record of performance. Their particular areas of interest with regard to this record of success include:

- Accomplishment within the institution
  - Retention rates
  - Graduate rates
- Satisfaction with their experiences at the institution

- Accomplishment in subsequent endeavors
  - Admission to, and performance in, graduate school
  - Job placement and salary

The list of audiences having a stake in the assurance of institutional quality could be extended further, but with little added benefit relative to the underlying question. Foundations and other "investors" have the same general interests as state governments and students, who also constitute major investors. Boards of Trustees play a surrogate role as guarantors of quality on behalf of the broad range of interests served by the college or university, but they are unlikely to have a definition of quality independent of all other interested parties. The growing mobility of students and graduates means that foreign governments and institutions may have an additional interest in the quality of American institutions of higher education. But again, the nature of their interest is unlikely to be different from those already elucidated.

III. Information requirements associated with different constituent perspectives

Different audiences sustain different perspectives on what the "quality" of higher education means. These differences are reflected in both the entity about which questions of quality are considered (the unit of analysis distinction) and the specific aspects of that entity that are of most interest as the focus of quality determination. As a result, they also yield variations in the kinds of information that each actor seeks as being indicative of high quality. These variations are illustrated in the extended table beginning on page 15.

IV. Conclusions

Many constituent groups—both inside the academy and external to it—have a stake in the assurance of quality in American higher education. As described in this paper, these different constituent groups have very different notions of what constitutes quality. Different constituents look at different things and at different aspects of these various entities. Consequently, the evidence they seek as indicative of quality varies widely.

While perspectives on quality vary considerably, the actual mechanisms in place to provide quality assurance in the U.S. are limited in both intended audience and scope. Accreditation organizations and the processes they employ can meet the quality assurance requirements of some—but certainly not all constituents.

Institutional and programmatic accreditation serves not only the academy, but also those stakeholders who define quality in terms of:

1. The presence of the necessary capacity to function as an institution of higher education.
2. The financial stability of the organization and the degree to which it will continue to be a going concern.
3. The extent to which basic processes are in place to ensure that students and employees will be treated fairly and with integrity, and that basic academic integrity will be maintained.
4. The degree to which attention is given to student outcomes—especially straightforward measures of retention and graduation and to processes that require gathering and using institutionally determined measures of outcomes.

Institutional and programmatic accreditation as it is generally structured and conducted can serve the basic quality assurance needs of the academy, the federal government, and state governments in their roles as "owner-operator" of institutions.

But neither institutional nor programmatic accreditation can serve as well the quality assurance needs of those constituents whose view of quality focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis. This includes students and employers and state governments in their roles as purchasers of services from higher education. Instead, the primary devices for compiling information that matches these needs are:

- Longitudinal unit record systems that can be queried to match student profile information against the retention and graduation performance of similar students in a variety of other institutions and programs.
- Follow-up information obtained from graduates that indicates levels of success—again, for students like themselves—in future endeavors including the workplace and further education.
- Results of student satisfaction surveys that focus on levels of access to institutional assets and on the presence, and sufficiency, of services of primary concern to students.

This level of consumer information is unlikely to be maintained in any systematic fashion by any organization except a state higher education agency. Even if state agencies were to assume the role of providing this information, doing so would not be a complete solution. For example, such databases would not necessarily contain information on independent institutions within the state, nor would they include data on out-of-state institutions (unless all states participated in common approaches to providing this information). The only possible alternative to a state agency as the provider of such information would be a private concern. For example, a firm such as Amazon.com might maintain e-lists of information commenting on the institution and its programs. While this is a possibility, it is fraught with problems concerning both coverage and representativeness of respondents.

Interests of employers about the quality of individual graduates/employees are best served by individual student certification of attainment. This means that the providers of quality assurance information most relevant to employer needs are testing companies and assessment centers. It might be possible for specialized (program-specific) accrediting organizations to provide this service, but to date they have not done so. The closest these organizations have come to meeting this need is the compilation of data about licensure pass rates.

It is important to note that employers almost uniformly seek information that provides more detail than simple "pass-fail" distinctions. They are less interested in knowing that an institution, program, or individual meets minimum requirements than they are in knowing how much **above** the minimum performance is gauged. This means that most of the measures that are willingly made public by the academy are deemed insufficient by employers.

Finally, employers and state governments (in their role as purchasers of services) have quality assurance needs that attach to programs rather than to individuals. These needs center on responsiveness to clients and fitness for purpose. Since state needs and those of most employers are met by local institutions—and because these needs may vary considerably from state to state—it is unlikely that the required information can be compiled by any organization except a state higher education agency.

The Bottom Line

As currently constituted, accreditation serves the needs of external constituents when these constituents are interested in institutional or programmatic capacity and behavior. Accreditation processes do not work as well when the focus is on **utilization** of that capacity to achieve particular **outcomes** valued by the constituents in question. For students, employers, and states (in their role as the purchaser of services), alternative sources of information and modes of quality assurance will have to be developed if their interests are to be adequately served.

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Institutional and programmatic accreditation as it is generally structured and conducted can serve the basic quality assurance needs of the academy, the federal government, and state governments in their roles as 'owner-operator' of institutions.

But neither institutional nor programmatic accreditation can serve as well the quality assurance needs of those constituents whose view of quality focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis...students, employers, and state governments in their roles as purchasers of services from higher education."

This basic conclusion has several key implications for accrediting organizations and their role in quality assurance. First, accrediting organizations will not be able to address the quality assurance needs and expectations of all external audiences through their normal processes. Without fundamental changes they can serve the needs of the federal government and state governments (in their "owner-operator" roles) as well as of the academy. But they will not adequately serve employers, students and their parents, or state governments in their role as purchasers of services. Thus, they must be realistic about the limits of the role that they can realistically expect to serve with respect to external audiences. Meeting the needs of audiences primarily interested in the utilization of capacity will require entirely new approaches, not tinkering with those already in place.

Second, there will **always** be other providers of quality assurance information. Some quality assurance activities will require the active involvement of state higher education agencies. Others will require an increasing involvement of organizations that certify levels of knowledge and skills of individual students. The latter of these is a role that could be assumed in some fields by specialized accrediting bodies if they chose to follow this path. The reality, however, is that the needs of these external audiences will most likely be met by organizations other than accrediting organizations. This raises the specter of conflicting evidence—accredited institutions with poor performance records as shown by alternative sources of information and unaccredited educational providers with solid performance records as demonstrated by outside sources. Over time, it will be impossible to ward off or ignore such conflicting evidence where it arises. Such discrepancies will have to be accommodated. One alternative is to ignore the issue until it can be ignored no longer. Another is to take an active role in encouraging the development and communication of a broader array of information among all of the relevant quality assurance players—and do so in such a way that additional integrity and standardization is brought to the process.

Third, this conclusion suggests the importance of refocusing accreditation's attention on "good practices" insofar as they can be rigorously identified. This is particularly important with regard to academic processes within institutions. More is known about good academic practices than is practiced (or counted) at most institutions. Since capacity and good practice standards have been the hallmark of accreditation agencies, giving additional attention to the academic good practices dimension has merit.

Finally, if audiences such as employers and students are to be served by the quality assurance information currently provided by accreditors, some provision will have to be developed for gradations in performance among accredited institutions. Setting the sole criterion at the level of "minimally qualified" and making no other distinctions will not satisfy the needs of these groups. Even something as simple as meets minimum requirements, exceeds minimum requirements, and far exceeds requirements would be a step in the right direction.

With information increasingly available and with more and more organizations taking steps to provide it to different interested parties, accrediting organizations will inevitably lose "market share" in quality assurance provision. The question for the future will be "how much of the growing market for information do they want to influence," not "how much do they want to control?"

Information Requirements Associated With Different Constituent Perspectives

CONSTITUENT/ PERSPECTIVE	UNIT OF ANALYSIS			FORM OF PRESENTATION
	Institution	**Program**	**Individual**	
Academy	**<u>Assets</u>** 1. Faculty-Staff • Full-time/part-time • Qualifications/degrees • Race and gender 2. Students • Numbers • Participation measures (level, full-time/ part-time, etc.) • Race and gender • Age 3. Finance • Assets and liabilities • Revenues and expenditures • Fund balances 4. Facilities • Amounts, by type • Value • Replacement rates 5. Equipment/Tech • Amounts • Value • Replacement rates 6. Library/Collections • Size • Annual additions 7. Programs • Numbers • Levels • Size/enrollment 8. Board Governance Structure • Appropriate membership **<u>Presence of appropriate processes</u>** 1. For dealing with students • Truth in advertising • Admission • Grievance procedures 2. For dealing with employees • Academic freedom • Promotion/tenure/merit • Due process in handling grievances	**<u>Assets</u>** Same as institution, but specific to individual program Advisory Structure • Appropriate membership Program specific but generally same as institution		Narrative descriptions with lots of contextual information and a nuanced description of how institutional assets and practices conform to industry standards. The criteria are "minimally acceptable" assets and practices.

CONSTITUENT/ PERSPECTIVE	UNIT OF ANALYSIS			FORM OF PRESENTATION
	Institution	**Program**	**Individual**	
Academy (cont.)	3. For dealing with changes to, and ensuring integrity of, curricula and academic programs 4. For internal decision making • Appropriate allocation of responsibility and authority • Appropriate involvement and participation in decision making processes			
	Outcomes			
	1. Retention and graduation 2. Post-graduate success • Employment • Further education • Civic engagement 3. Student satisfaction 4. Mechanisms for acquiring other outcome information as appropriate to institution's mission and declarations of intent	Program specific, but generally same as institution—except that retention and graduation rates are typically institutional, not program, measures Also: Pass rates on certification exams		
Federal Government	**Assets**			Certification of accreditation status
	1. Same as those of importance to the academy with emphasis on financial viability 2. Accreditation status is a key asset			
	Good Practices			
	Same as the academy, plus: • Adherence to federal rules and regulations • Due process • Refund policies			Summary of reported management/ operational deficiencies
	Outcomes			Statistical reports
	1. Graduation and retention rates 2. Access measures—profile of student body 3. Contributions to national priorities—research outcomes			
State Government As "Owner Operators"	**Assets** Same as the academy	**Assets** Same as the academy		Certification as to accreditation status Comparative program rankings

CONSTITUENT/ PERSPECTIVE	UNIT OF ANALYSIS			FORM OF PRESENTATION
	Institution	**Program**	**Individual**	
State Government As "Owner Operators" (cont.)	**Good Practices** Same as the academy • Conformance with state and federal rules and regulations **Outcomes** 1. Retention and graduation rate 2. Student learning	**Good Practices** Same as the academy		Compilations of any management deficiencies (audit reports, etc.) Statistical reports Accreditation—indication that assessment processes are in place
As Purchaser of Services	**Good Practices** Responsiveness to needs of the state and its citizens	**Good Practices** Responsiveness to needs of the state and its citizens **Outcomes** • Degree production in fields related to state priorities • Licensure pass rates • Placement (especially in-state) • Levels of corporate training and industry-funded research		Employer and community satisfaction surveys Statistical reports Comparative Performance Indicators
Employers	**Assets/Capacity** Institutional reputation/ status	**Assets/Capacity** • Reputation • Faculty—capacities related to employer needs • Curriculum—alignment with employer needs **Good Practices** • Responsiveness to employer needs • Hands-on experience of program graduates **Outcomes** • Numbers of graduates • Placement information • Job mobility information • Pass rates on licensure exams		• Comparative rankings—popular press or trade press (for programs) • Demonstrated success—industry word of mouth • Analysis of syllabi • Experience/industry word of mouth • Statistical reports • Statistical reports • Comparative statistics

CONSTITUENT/ PERSPECTIVE	UNIT OF ANALYSIS			FORM OF PRESENTATION
	Institution	Program	Individual	
Employers (cont.)				• Certification of competencies—especially against industry-defined standards • Employer assessments of student performance in workplace setting (co-op, internship, etc.)
Professions	**Assets/Capacity** • Institutional status • Accredited status	**Assets/Capacity** • Reputation • Accredited status • Faculty—ability to lead/enhance the profession • Curriculum—aligned with profession's priorities		• Comparative rankings—trade press • Demonstrated success—professional honors • Analysis of syllabi
		Good Practices • Research that furthers profession • Public service to profession		• Publication in professional journals • Leadership positions in profession
		Outcomes • Number of graduates • Placement information • Pass rates on licensure exams	**Outcomes** Acquisition of license/certification	• License/certification • Placement information
Students/ Parents	**Assets/Capacity** Institutional reputation			1. Rankings in popular press • *U.S. News* • *Money* 2. Comparative statistics • NSSE • CRS
	Outcomes 1. Student survey results concerning access to assets • Courses • Programs • Faculty • Technology • Student support services	**Good Practices** • Same as institution with regard to access to resources		Comparative statistics

CONSTITUENT/ PERSPECTIVE	UNIT OF ANALYSIS			FORM OF PRESENTATION
	Institution	**Program**	**Individual**	
Students/ Parents (cont.)	**Outcomes** 2. Student survey results regarding • Satisfaction with services • "Student-centeredness" of institution			
		• Workplace experience as part of program		Comparative statistics
	Outcomes For Students Like Themselves 1. Accomplishment within the institution • Graduation and retention rates 2. Satisfaction with experiences 3. Accomplishment in subsequent endeavors • Subsequent education • Job placement and salary	**Outcomes** Same as institution		Comparative statistics
		• Licensure pass rates • Typical occupations and salaries five years after graduation		

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